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ABSTRACT

There is an urgent need to restructure universities in Africa; current problems include the loss of autonomy, a decaying infrastructure, inadequate salaries, an internal job market void of opportunities, brain drain, intellectual isolation, diminished research, and fossilized curricula. There is an equal need for a stabilized funding source and reduced enrollment. Among suggestions for change are expanding extension programs to include evening and vacation classes, and allowing more teaching hours to those who teach during the day and must seek a second job at night. In addition, the university should establish a self-financing consulting office to interact with government departments, the private sector, and international organizations. Competitive rates paid to academics would cut down on the use of highly paid foreign experts. Further suggestions include the creation of an independent think tank funded by an independent government source that would apply expertise to national problems. The curriculum should allow for more flexibility in course selections. Universities should expand technological and commercial training to provide middle management skills and technical capabilities. (NL)

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RESTRUCTURING THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY FROM GHANA

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Paper given at the African Studies Association Annual Meeting at Atlanta 1989

RESTRUCTURING THE AFRICAN UNIVERSITY: A CASE STUDY FROM GHANA

There is little doubt that there is a crisis in the African university -- not in all, but in far too many in eastern, southern and western Africa. Some universities, as in Nigeria, are presently closed and others have only just reopened. Unlike the crisis in the American and European universities in the 1960's where the protest was as much against the state, the problems in African universities are more fundamental. There is an urgent need to restructure institutions of higher education in Africa. In the last twelve months there have been strikes by faculty and students and closures by government in more than a dozen countries caused by protests over faculty pay scales, student loans, inadequate food, and graduate unemployment. There is basically a crisis of confidence, academia feels that government does not care and government all too often resents what it regards as selfish motivation by intellectuals who it feels should support their goals of national development.

The crisis has developed gradually. In the heady early days of independence, universities, like the University of Ghana at Legon, were centers of excellence, attracting leading intellectuals, producing outstanding reseach, developing specialist Africana libraries, and producing students who were competitive with the best graduates from

leading European and American colleges. In the early 1960's there were less than 15,000 students in tropical Africa. The African university was an elite institution and none more so than the University of Ghana at Legon with most of its students drawn from the same small clusters of boarding schools. During the 1970's and early 1980's the sheer growth of numbers to now over a quarter of a million, a fifteen fold increase, changed the cozy character of the 1960's colleges. The intimacy went. It became impossible to apply the same large percentage of the educational budget to these centers of excellence without neglecting the rest of the educational system or starving social services as a whole. African economies had collapsed. Security costs too often replaced education as a key component of state financing.

The problems that afflict African universities, and in particular Ghana, are all too well known to be spelled out in detail but they include the loss of autonomy and thus of academic freedom as univesities have become de facto appendages of ministries of education forced to solicit for funds on a month to month basis; a decaying intrastructure; a demoralized faculty, having to manage on salaries of less than $100 per month; an acute brain drain of both graduates and faculty; intellectual isolation as libraries stand still and opportunities for outside contacts dry up; insecurity among graduates faced with an internal job market void of opportunity; diminished research, as faculty finds it impossible to cope on an academic stipend and need to fill their time with second and third jobs; fossilized curricula which have scarcely changed since the time that the African universities were spawned from their colonial academic masters and falling academic standards which reflect on both school inefficiencies and faculty abstraction, these problems combined add up to institutional

marginalization. The African university is neither the intellectual force it was a quarter of a century ago nor a center of political influence. Scholars and government are only too well aware of the problems. In Ghana proposals have been made for reconstituting tertiary education wihich include greater accessibility to higher education and higher student numbers.

There are basically two initial alternatives for future university development, either reduced numbers of students and a streamlined university system utilizing both physical and human resources better than at present, or much more funding. It is impossible to have the improvements that the situation demands without providing extra funds. With smaller numbers until the programs of structural adjustment begin to really pay dividends, it may be possible to improve both the quality of university life and make the university more effective and responsive to national needs. Restrictions may have to be made of whole institutions or departments. There is nothing sacrosanct in departments inherited from the University of London. Academic innovation has to be sought by creating special interdepartmental programs rather than by adding expensive new academic units. An efficient university reforming itself is more likely to attract the confidence of both government and outside sponsors. Key ingredients of any restructing involves improved financial integrity, more efficient use of scarce facilities, greater relevance of the academic curriculum and a greater service element by the University to the Ghanaian community.

The key ingredient in reconstituting the African university is probably psychological. Confidence has to be restored among both faculty and students. The university has to be seen as part of the solution to

national reconstruction rather than as part of the problem. What is needed is a sense of vision provided by university leadership as the African university enters the age of electronic revolution and computer generated communication and data retrieval. That vision has to be convincingly sold both to governements and outside sponsors. For far too long universities, reduced in the last ten years to living from day to day, waiting on the Ministry of Education for monthly checks to pay their staff, have reacted to the decisions of others, such as the World Bank. It is time for an open debate about the future of the African university involving not only academic students and government but also leaders of commerce and industry. A vision involves committed leadership, which at present has too little opportunity to manifest itself, but once it does, then confidence, the essential psychological ingredient for credibility, can be re-established.

The most pressing problem in restructuring the African university is probably financial. How can more money be obtained? It clearly is not in the 1990's going to come from abroad. It has to come from either the state which means the state has to believe in the efficacy of the university or from the university itself which up to now has not occurred. Making the university more exclusive in the short run will certainly improve performance and provide a more stable and comfortable atmosphere for scholarship. A start has been made in self financing the university with the introduction of student fees for feeding and ultimately boarding. The initial impact hits both students and parents extremely hard but there are ways of mitigating the hardship. One solution which is slowly being implemented is that of a course system similar to the American model with specific numbers of units for courses and the facility for students to take a university degree over an extended period of time. There is nothing

sacred in the three-year continuous degree. Many students who do a year or two and then go out into the working world come back into academia both more able to finance their own education and much more determined to succeed. An education yearned for and planned for is taken more seriously. There are strong arguments in favor of requiring those students taking a degree in a professional school to spend several years on the job so that when they come back to complete their degrees they have firsthand experience of what the world outside is all about. This applies particularly to Business Adminsitration. Students straight from school really just do not have the relevant work experience to appreciate the practical implications of their syllabus. Another option is of course to expand mature entry into the university with the funding for the education partly coming from secondment agrements with both the government and the private sector. The university has excellent facilities which are underutilized both in the evenings and during the vacations. Serious consideration should be given both to introducing an expanded extension program of evening and vacation classes, with university credits given for such courses, and to providing an Open university system. The present worker education function of the Institute of Adult Education of the University of Ghana is excellent but there is a need to complement its activities to serve the students who will be gaining a degree over a longer time period and who may not necessarily be offered a paid secondment to attend on a full-time basis. It is more satisfactory to have university lecturers paid for giving identical classes in the evening, to those they give in the day, than to let them waste their intellects and academic training in discovering ways to trade, farm or run taxis as is presently the case.

There are other ways of generating more finance. With a more streamlined university, having better research facilities, the university should enter aggressively into the consulting business. At the present some individuals, rather than the institution as a whole, benefit from consulting. A special business office, and here I stress the word business implying self-financing, should be created to interact with government departments, the private sector and international organizations. Unviersities should charge competitive rates for the expertise of the academics rather than is the case at the present whereby an expatriate consultant may receive $5-10,000 per month for a consultancy and a Ghanaian less than $200. West Africans would certainly be prepared to work for fair rates without the extravagance of foreign experts who are geared to their own high priced economies. Universities should receive overhead charges for the services of their staff. The creation of an independent think tank would assist the competitiveness of the university and eventually save the government money. Such a think tank should include Ghana's most distinguished Ghanaian economists, sociologists and ecologists attracted back from their foreign posts for a few years at a time, in some cases as little as a year, but preferably up to three years, to enable them to apply their expertise to Ghana's problems. Though housed at the University and interacting with University faculty, they should be funded by an independent government source. Their scholarship and experience would enrich Ghana both directly and indirectly and enhance the status of the University. The return of such native daughters and sons would probably provide a stimulation to scholarship on the campus and be far less expensive than short-term foreign advisors. There is little doubt that distinguished Ghanaian scholars would welcome the change to return home

even if the stipends were somewhat less than those at Stanford or Bellagio. It is not unusual for think tanks to be created in times of national emergency. The great physicists of the Cavendish in Cambridge; the scientists at the California Institute of Technology or economists and sociologists at LSE have over the years and at different times provided conscious think tanks ready to analyse specific problems and provide a pool of intellect to inspire and advise. It might be said that Ghana cannot afford a think tank and yet the history of Ghana indicates that it has relied on foreign advisors sent by the Ford Foundation, the World Bank and other organizations which themselves rely on scholars from the most prestigious of foreign think tanks. Who pays for this advice, Ghana does indirectly. The cost of feasibility studies forms part of its foreign aid.

The African universities in the main have not tapped their alumni nor the participation of their wealthier citizens. Every cloud has a silver lining and the same dictum applies to the brain drain. There may be one and a half, some say as many as two million, Ghanaians outside the country. Many are in high paying positions, some of those were trained at Legon, taught at Legon or are the children of Legon graduates. There should be a a very concerted effort to establish an effective alumni organization headed by a high official of the University of Ghana. American, and increasingly European universities, mercilessly exploit their alumni, and the parents of alumni, for funds. They sweeten the pill with attractive pictorial claendars, pens, tee shirts and the like as premiums for donations. It works. Ghanaians, as I know only too well, can be generous to a fault. Ghanaians overseas like to feel in touch with home. Students could be involved in such organizations providing links with individual

alumni. Alumni in commerce and industry in Ghana should be involved. The spirit of volunteerism is very alive and well in Ghana.

In what ways can the University both be more relevant and of service to the community? Relevance involves rethinking the application of the knowledge we transmit. The transmission of knowledge is the key to cultural evolution. Cultural evolution, just as much as biological evolution, is determined by the selection of those traits that are essential for survival. The transmission of knowledge, or what can be termed the academic tradition, cannot be conducted without intimate consideration of the demands of the society of which the university is an integral part. A few years ago it was relevant to insist that students have a core knowledge of African studies, this was to counterbalance the non-African biases of the curriculum inherited from London or Paris. After twenty-five years during which university departments have adopted African syllabi and numerous generations of teachers have gone out to the schools and training colleges with an enlightened African approach, it is time that we examined our present priorities. Now the urgent necessity is for all of our graduates to understand the problems that Ghana, and Africa in general, face. Such basic questions as, why can we not feed ourselves entirely, why is it important to protect the environment, what are the respective roles of government and the private sector in development or what is appropriate technology, are all relevant questions that concerned undergraduates should learn about and discuss in college. Developmental studies should form an essential curriculum core not only of Social Science departments but also of Arts, Agriculture, and the Sciences. Lecturers and students should become more appreciative of the applications of their knowledge. With universities being more involved in the process of consultancy to

government and business, lecturers should consider combining their research with teaching and form project teams of faculty and students to provide fast evaluations of key problems.

One advantage of such teams is that the many eyes, ears, hands and brains, that students provide, can speed up and expand the capability of the skilled consultant. Longer term studies should be initiated. All students should be required to spend at least one term on such a project or should work as interns in government departments, or in the private sector, applying their training and specific skills and gaining job experience and in many cases being paid. Students in professional schools could with advantage possibly spend more than one term either on a full time or part time basis. In this way they are exposed to working conditions and can be placed more easily in job situations at the completion of their studies. Students in the humanities should definitely be involved. The ability to write well, to select data and synthesize a large body of information, which good essay training in the Liberal Arts provides, is probably just as imortant as technical expertise. Using this ability is one of the best ways of convincing a student that writing essays or research papers is one of the most valuable skills they will acquire at university. In both Europe and the States large corporations have come to appreciate this fact and students in the Humanities, especially in subjects like Philosophy, are being sought after for trianing in management positions. If such internships were strictly graded there would be an increased dedication to development work that is not always the case in the present system of National Service where performance on the job neither counts towards a degree nor affects one's ultimate salary or job prospects.

The cultural component in restructuring the African university, however, should not be lost sight of. As the new university is created there is a need to examine non-Western models, like those of the Far East where Japan is a good example. When faced with the problem of catching up on the technological lead of the West, it flirted with the idea of using European languages. It, however, preserved the integrity of the culture and used Japanese as the medium of scholarship. One problem in Africa is undoubtedly that the use of European languages induced the use of European education models. A greater grasp of African culture, the greater use of African language, music and literature must surely bring more authentic and acceptable models. What has been termed an endogenous approach.

In the early 1960's Tanzania experimented with the Chinese "bare-foot" doctor model of development. Is it really necesary to ape the hyperspecialization of the West when there are none of the resources to support the technological development that such specialization requires? Cut out some of the rarified scientific specializations, concentrate on the better utilization of local plants, on intermediate technology for food processing, and fuel conservation rather than go into pharmaceutical engineering and space science. Occupy niches that the West may have neglected.

There are many other topics that I would have liked to have touched upon which include the need to give African universities a greater international dimension either through bilateral agreements or the attraction of foreign scholars with the help of fellowships endowed by multinational corporations. The numbers of foreign students should be increased from the present 1-3% of many African universities to 5-8%. In developing countries foreign students can clearly be a source of much

needed foreign exchange as well as a window onto the wider world. Underutilized facilities could be maximized by using them for summer undergraduate and graduate programs from abroad and employing those faculty who badly need the fees from occasional guest lectures. African universities like Legon clearly need to be more flexible in their academic structure allowing students to take more than two or three subjects and to allow them to change subjects rather than presently being straitjacketed into the subjects they took at school or into the disciplines that have vacancies. Students in African universities are still underutilized. Rather than being the constituency served, they need to play a greater role in service to the rest of the university community in libraries, eateries, administration, and particularly in the generation of information and service from the university to the community.

In case there are some who think I'm advocating an abandonment of greater access to higher education in Africa, I would like to reiterate that what I am advocating is an improvement of services which involve temporary reduction of numbers whilst restructuring is taking place. Once the university is perceived as more efficient, once the brain drain is slowed down by greater opportunity, once confidence is restored and government shows appreciation of the relevance of the university through increased funding, then, and only then, will it be time to expand in a planned direction. In the meanwhile, it may be more worthwhile to expand institutions concerned with commercial and technological training to provide the middle management and technical capabilties that Ghana and much of Africa lacks.

Merrick Posnansky - 4 November 1989